



United Nations 2003 Report on World Social Situation Analyzes Causes, Remedies to Social Vulnerability

(United Nations, New York, 3 October 2003) – The causes and manifestations of vulnerability have multiplied and changed profoundly over the last decade, says the United Nations 2003 *Report on the World Social Situation* issued today. They now include civil strife and the proliferation of conflicts, growing inequalities within and among countries accentuated by globalization, mixed outcomes of poverty reduction efforts, increased mobility of populations, and changes in family structures.

Focusing on “social vulnerability: sources and challenges”, the report views no social group as inherently vulnerable. But all groups face vulnerabilities, which are largely the outcome of economic, social and cultural barriers that restrict opportunities and impede the participation and social integration of the members of the groups.

The report stresses vulnerabilities specific to certain groups and the challenges of social inclusion — an approach that helps to identify barriers that prevent social integration for these groups. The specific groups dealt with include children and youth, older persons, persons with disabilities, indigenous persons, migrants, and persons in situations of conflict, with gender issues as an overall challenge.

Vulnerability and poverty interact with each other, says the report, creating a vicious circle in which the two reinforce each other. Most vulnerable to economic shocks, material losses and losses of well-being, poor people can easily see their ability to move out of poverty destroyed by these events, which may irreversibly deplete their human and physical assets.

The poor are especially affected by an increase in vulnerability because they have greater exposure to many downward risks — illness, death, loss of employment, famine — and are less capable of responding to them. Poverty also increases vulnerability indirectly, by fueling social tensions and undermining the social cohesion needed to pre-empt and respond to emerging dangers.

While income insecurity and lack of access to employment stands out as one of the most important sources of vulnerability, it is not only the lack of incomes and financial assets that reduces the capacity to cope. Lack of education, poor health, limited access to health services and education are important factors, as are socio-cultural biases and discriminatory attitudes and practices.

To achieve a reduction in vulnerability, it is important to gain an understanding of the factors and forces that lie at its source, the report says. In other words: what makes an individual or group vulnerable — or at greater risk to becoming vulnerable — to a variety of social ills? There are both internal and external dynamics at play in determining one’s level of vulnerability, encompassing a variety of economic, social and environmental factors.

Proper identification of trends and driving forces, coupled with an assessment of the underlying causes leading to structural vulnerabilities, can provide a basis for a well-designed and balanced policy action, the report says. Anchoring this policy to empowerment and social integration increases the chances of success in the long run.

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Stressing the need for policies that address vulnerability, the report puts forward recommendations that include removing employment barriers, promoting social integration and social protection, protecting rights of all members of society, and strengthening international cooperation. A rights-based approach is helpful at both the national and international levels, says the report. Finally, reducing social vulnerability requires a multi-pronged and internally consistent policy framework, since its causes and effects are multi-faceted and interlinked.

Prepared by the Division for Social Policy and Development of the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, the 2003 Report on the World Social Situation (RWSS) is the sixteenth in a series of such reports dating back to 1952.

2003 Report on the World Social Situation

Social Vulnerability: Sources and Challenges

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